

CORBIT-SHARP HOUSE
(William Corbit House)
Main and Second Streets
Odessa
New Castle County
Delaware

HALS DE-1
HALS DE-1

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

CORBIT-SHARP HOUSE (William Corbit House)

HALS NO. DE-1

- Location:** Main and Second Streets, Odessa, New Castle County, Delaware
Lat: 39.453869 Long: -75.657086 (Center of House, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)
- Significance:** The property is a National Historic Landmark. The house, erected in 1772-74, is one of the great late-Georgian houses in Delaware and the Middle Colonies. It also illustrates the architectural influence of Philadelphia on smaller towns in its region. The landmark has received Underground Railroad Network to Freedom recognition. Hugh Rodney Sharp purchased the house and property in 1938 during the Colonial Revival period. He consulted landscape architect H. L. Lindsay to restore the house to its original Georgian style. Landscape architect, Marian Cruger Coffin, designed the gardens in ca. 1938-45.
- Description:** Landscape architect, Marian Cruger Coffin, was consulted to create a new colonial revival garden, which emphasized plantings of practical and ornamental uses. The garden was conveniently located adjacent to the kitchen, although the layout is strongly axial and bilaterally symmetrical, it is worth noting that the central axis of the garden aligns with the mass of the house but does not appear to relate to a significant door or window.

The front of the Corbit-Sharp House originally faced Second Street with its bustling traffic to and from the tannery and seaport on the Appoquinimink River until H. Rodney Sharp began restoration of the property in 1938. He blocked off the section of Second Street that ran in front of his house and removed many of the 19th century outbuildings and trees to open views of the Appoquinimink River. Currently, the views of the river are obscured by a segment of the property leased to a commercial tree grower. The Historic Odessa Foundation anticipates restoring the views at the time the lease expires. It is the foundation's goal to recreate the view that Mr. Sharp intended.

In 1985, Dr. Charles W. Dunham, Professor Emeriti of the University of Delaware and a horticulturalist proposed a plan for a low maintenance garden due to overgrown shrubs that became intrusive to its symmetry. Today, the landscape and gardens are well groomed and maintained by volunteers and serve as a popular destination event site. A handful of large trees still exist on the property today that date back to the Sharp era.

The smokehouse is the only original out-building on the property today, and it has been documented by the Historic American Buildings Survey as HABS DE-

90A. However, another notable outbuilding on the property today is the stone herb house, constructed for H. Rodney Sharp in admiration of a similar structure in Maryland.

History:

At the time when William Corbit, a Quaker, built his Georgian style home in 1772-1774, the town of Odessa was called Cantwell's Bridge. Mr. Corbit was one of the leading citizens of the town of Odessa who operated a tannery on the banks of the Appoquinimink River. The Appoquinimink River was an important part of the town's economy. In 1855, Cantwell's Bridge was renamed Odessa, after a Russian seaport, in an effort to keep the town known as an important grain shipping port, but nonetheless, it was the Midwest that emerged as the nation's major grain producing region.

The Corbit-Sharp house has 22 rooms and sits on a two-acre site. It is one of the largest structures in Odessa constructed of locally made bricks. Mr. Corbit designed his home with influences from Philadelphia architecture, oblong with a hip roof and balustrade roof deck with decorative railing. He constructed Victorian additions that Mr. Sharp removed during his 1940s renovation. The house remained in the Corbit family until H. Rodney Sharp purchased it in 1938. For the next thirty years until his death in 1968, Mr. Sharp was devoted to the restoration of the Corbit-Sharp house and gardens in the town of Odessa.

To tell the story of the Corbit-Sharp house is impossible without including H. Rodney Sharp's influence on the town of Odessa. Mr. Sharp was born in Sussex County, Delaware. He moved to Odessa as a schoolteacher where he met Daniel Wheeler Corbit who was the last member of the family to live in the Corbit house. He became an accountant for the DuPont Company and married into the family with wife, Isabella, Pierre du Pont's sister. Mr. Sharp loved the town of Odessa so much that his philanthropy totaled more than \$50 million dollars.

The great depression of the 1930s hit Odessa's economy hard. Mr. Sharp was concerned that the Corbit house would be subject to hazards by renters, so he decided to restore it along with other significant buildings in Odessa. He turned to architect, H. L. Lindsey, for advice.

The restoration of the house is a significant example of the Colonial Revival period. Perhaps the largest part of the restoration project was closing the section of Second Street that ran in front of the house so that this portion of the land could become Mr. Sharp's front lawn. In front of his house was a hill obstructing the view of the Appoquinimink River. Mr. Sharp removed the hill and used that dirt to fill in the street, which raised the ground three feet. He also cleared trees and outbuildings obstructing his view of the river. The smokehouse is the only original out-building on the property today. Once the ground was in place, he built a brick terrace in front of the house and a brick wall facing Main Street with a cobblestone driveway and steps leading to the front door. He then planted

American Hollies, Southern Magnolias, and Linden trees. Two Sycamore trees in front of the rear door to the house remain today.

Landscape architect, Marian Cruger Coffin, designed the gardens in ca. 1938-45 in Colonial style with a romantic twist. Mr. Sharp enlisted the help of Marian Cruger Coffin, a renowned landscape architect, who designed H. F. DuPont's gardens at Winterthur. She looked toward Colonial Williamsburg for the design of Mr. Sharp's gardens and recommended a formal English garden, one that represented Colonial aristocracy. The geometric design measures about 80 by 30 feet. It included boxwood parterres with heart-shaped beds, pebbles, and brick walkways with two octagonal pie-shaped beds. The plantings consisted of annual flowers, herbs, and flowering shrubs and fruit trees on the outside of the garden. Mr. Sharp built an herb house on the property after seeing one on a Maryland property designed by architect Henry Forman.

In 1982, winter killed most of the boxwoods and Winterthur decided to remove them citing the cost of maintenance was too high. The boxwoods were replaced with grass. By 1985, Steve Pulinka, site administrator of Historic Houses of Odessa, turned to volunteers for help.

Mr. Pulinka enlisted the help of Charles Dunham, Professor Emeriti of the University of Delaware and a horticulturalist. Dr. Dunham proposed a plan to create a community garden that would provide seasonal color and low maintenance plantings but keep the Sharp garden design intact. Overgrown shrubs and trees intrusive to the symmetry of the garden were removed. Dr. Dunham is still consulted today for his expertise and guidance on the care and maintenance of the garden.

Mr. Sharp bestowed the Corbit House to the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in 1958. For the next ten years, Mr. Sharp restored the Brick Hotel and donated it to the town. In 1959, Winterthur opened the doors of the Corbit house to the public and named it the Corbit-Sharp House. In 1968, Mr. Sharp died, and the town mourned the loss of a legacy.

The Corbit-Sharp house and gardens still captivate visitors today with its rich history and pristine landscape. The house and gardens continue to be maintained by volunteers through the Historical Society of Odessa.

Sources: "A Bit of the 18th Century in a Delaware Town." New York Times, October 17, 1965. Corbit-Calloway Memorial Library. October 9, 2010.

"Corbit-Sharp House." National Historic Landmarks Program. National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior. Web. September 22, 2010.
<http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=734&ResourceType=Building>

Corbit-Calloway Memorial Library. October 9, 2010. Visit. Odessa, DE.

Drive, By Dynamic. Historic Odessa Foundation - Historic Houses of Odessa.
2010 Historic Odessa Foundation. Web. September 22, 2010.
<http://www.historicodessa.org/>

Dunham, Dr. Charles W. University of Delaware, Professor Emeritus. Interview
by Cathy Kinney. Corbit-Sharp House gardens, October 9, 2010.

Gardens Chronology. Single Sheet of Paper. Historic Odessa Foundation,
Odessa, DE.

Historic Odessa Foundation, Odessa. DE. Research Library. October 2, 2010.

Newcomb, P. C. Background Information for Odessa Day Training. May11, year
unknown. Historic Odessa Foundation, Odessa, DE.

Pulinka, Steven M. Discover the Historic Houses of Odessa. Henry Francis
DuPont Winterthur Museum. 1953. Print.

Pulinka, Steven. "Information of Corbit-Sharp Gardens Story." Memorandum to
Lucinda Costin. August 9, 1985. Historic Odessa Foundation, Odessa, Delaware.

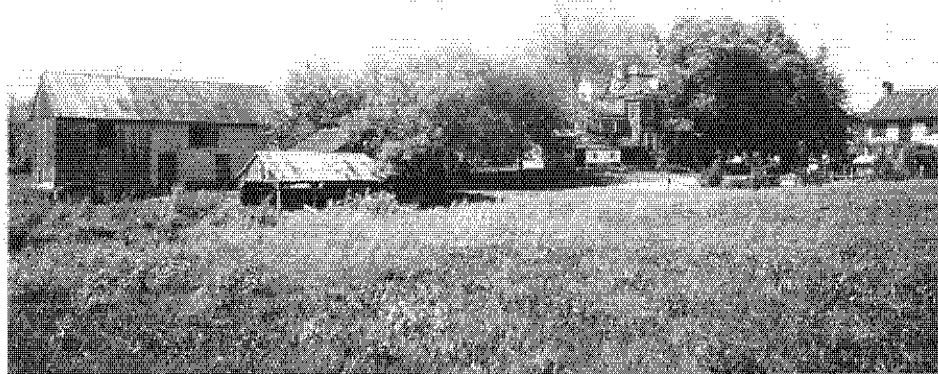
Historian: Cathy Kinney
Student, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware
October 28, 2010



William Corbit House. (Historic Odessa Foundation, ca. 1935).



The Corbit-Sharp House. (Cathy Kinney, October 2010).



View of the Corbit house from the Appoquinimink River before the restoration period. (Historic Odessa Foundation, ca. 1938).



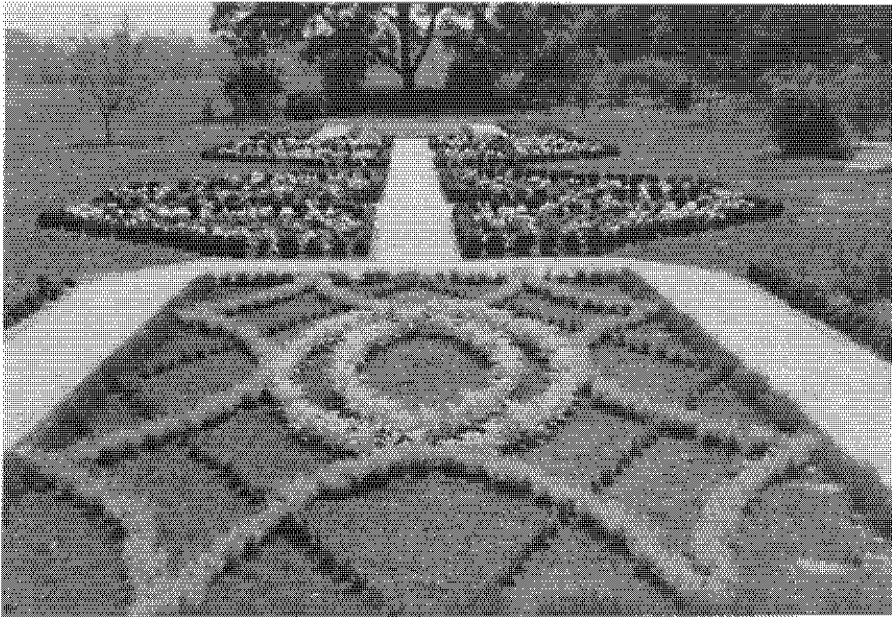
Current view from the house facing towards the Appoquinimink River. (Cathy Kinney, October 2010).



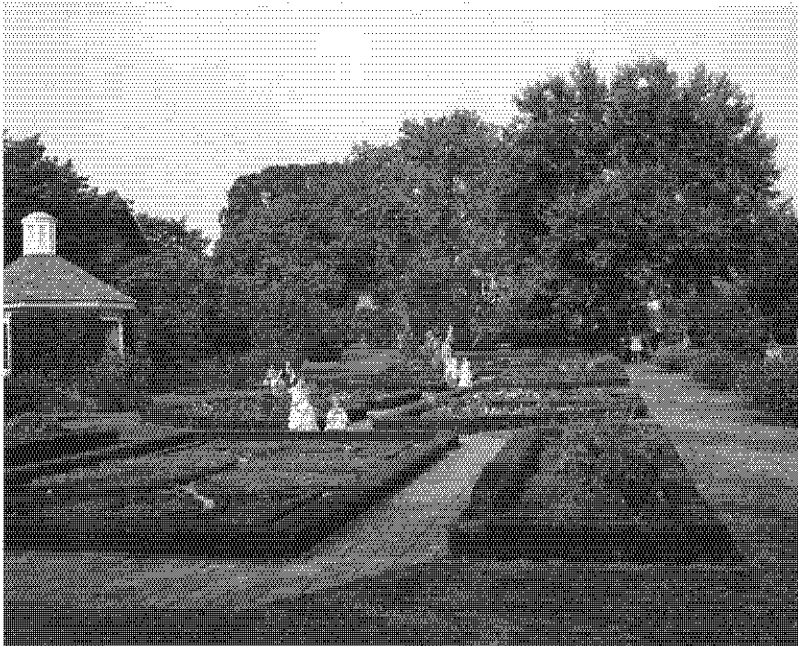
Sharp's restoration of the entryway to the property included a brick wall, cobblestone drive, and steps leading to the front door. (Cathy Kinney, October 2010).



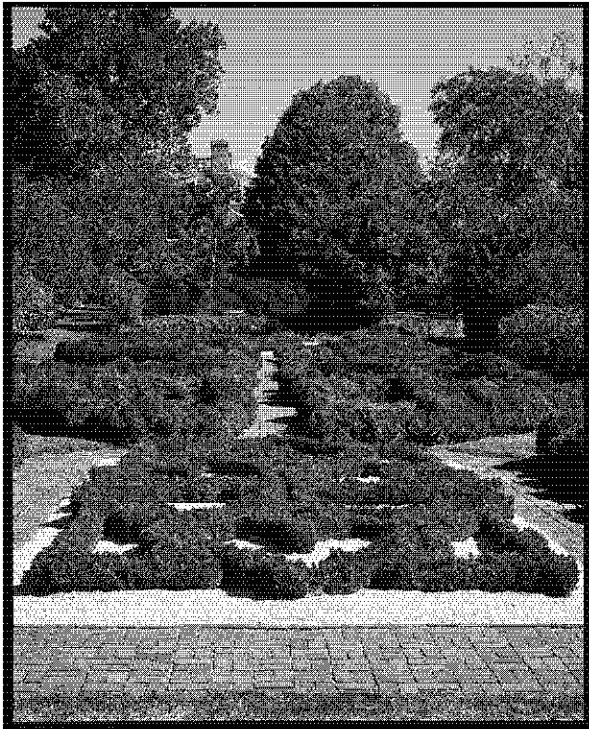
Sharp's construction of a three-foot wall that divided the lawn from the garden. (Cathy Kinney, October 2010).



A parterre (above) was believed to have been created to resemble a lattice design on Mrs. Sharp's button box. (Historic Odessa Foundation, ca. 1942).



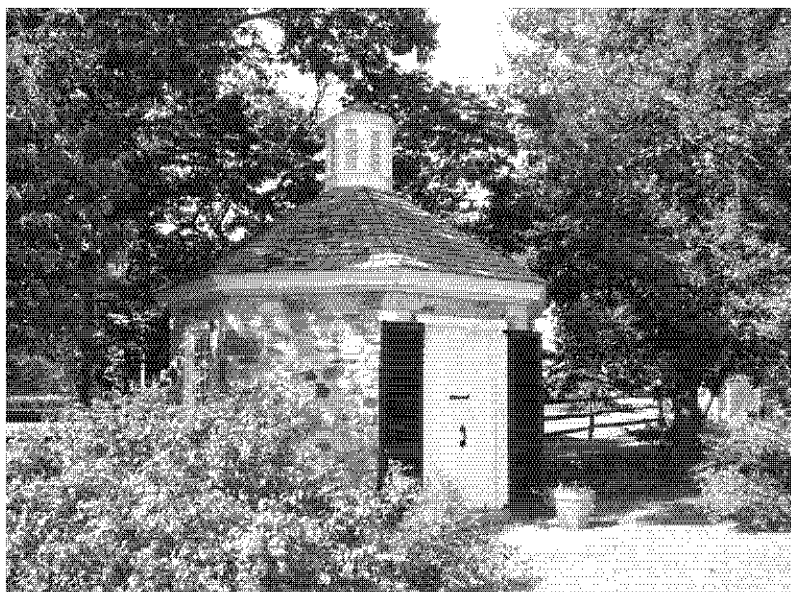
Corbit-Sharp House Gardens. (Historic Odessa Foundation, 1950).



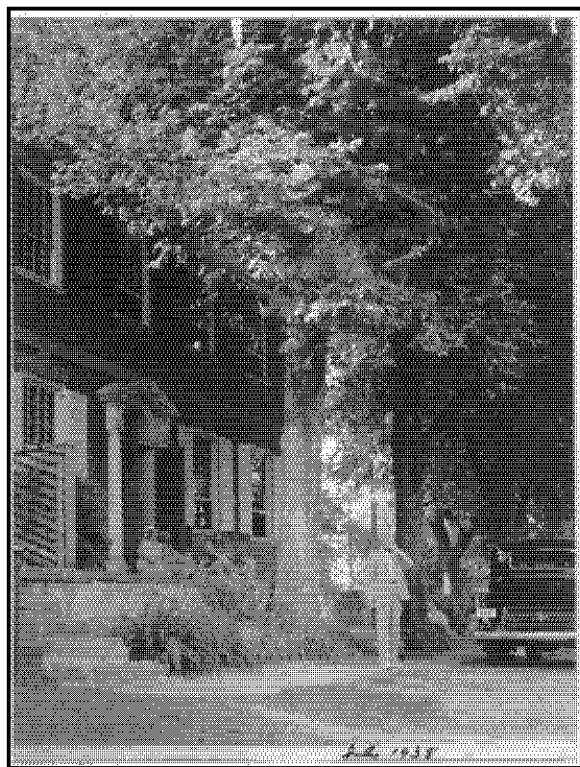
Heart-shaped beds (right) designed with a romantic twist for Isabella. (Historic Houses of Odessa Library, ca. 1960).



Geometric patterns such as two rectangular brick walkways, and two octagon pie-shaped beds. (Cathy Kinney, October 2010).



Herb house constructed alongside the formal garden modeled after one Mr. Sharp admired on a Maryland property that was designed by architect Henry Forman.(Cathy Kinney, October 2010).



H. Rodney Sharp standing in front of the Corbit-Sharp House (Historic Odessa Foundation, 1938).



Dr. Charles W. Dunham, Professor Emeritus of the University of Delaware (1984), horticulturalist, and resident of Odessa, DE since 1976. (Cathy Kinney, October 2010).